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Waxman retires after 20 terms



file photo

Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), a legislative giant who helped shepherd ObamaCare's passage, will retire from the House at the end of this Congress.

Waxman is a longtime ally of Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), and his decision to retire — following fellow Pelosi lieutenant Rep. George Miller's (D-Calif.) announcement earlier this year — will be taken as a sign Democrats are not confident about taking back the House this fall.

The twin retirements also raise new questions about Pelosi's future, and about who might succeed Waxman as the senior Democrat on the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Pelosi sought to head off any questions about her future shortly after Waxman's announcement, saying in a statement that her work in the House was not finished.

"I'm running. I've already started the paperwork process," she said. "My work here is not finished."

The deadline for filing paperwork in California is March 7, and nominations can be enrolled beginning Feb. 10.

Of course, Pelosi could choose to step down even after winning election. Democrats will choose their leadership team after Election Day, and a decision by Pelosi to leave now would send a terrible signal to her conference.

Waxman and Miller have served as enforcers in the Democratic Caucus for Pelosi. After President Obama won the White House in 2008, Waxman announced a challenge to longtime Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell (D-Mich.).

Pelosi did not publicly take sides in the battle, but Waxman's successful challenge came amid a push by Democrats to move a climate change bill in 2009, something that represented a top priority of the then-Speaker. It was thought at the time that Dingell would be less likely to move the legislation.

In a lengthy statement, Waxman insisted he was not leaving because of a lack of hope about Democrats regaining their majority.

"I am not leaving because I think House Democrats have no chance to retake the House," said the lawmaker, who criticized House Republicans as having "no compelling vision for the future."

"The public understands this, and I am confident that the Democrats can regain control of the House," he said.

Most political observers felt Democratic hopes to take back the House were a long shot even before Miller's and Waxman's announcements.

While Democrats had a surge of optimism after the October government shutdown sunk GOP approval ratings, the difficult rollout of ObamaCare quickly sapped their momentum.

"Seniors members may see the writing on the wall — they won't be getting their gavels back," said one Democratic strategist.

Pelosi issued a statement Thursday praising Waxman for his "extraordinary legislative skill, passionate public service, and bold leadership" over the last 40 years.

"Henry Waxman's imprint can be found on legislation addressing some of our nation's fundamental issues of health, environmental protection,

sustainability, economic growth, and national security," Pelosi said. "It has been a true privilege to call him colleague and a distinct honor to know him as a friend."

Obama, meanwhile, hailed Waxman as "one of the most accomplished legislators of his or any era."

In his statement, Waxman said he was grateful to his supporters and constituents for his long legislative career, which spanned 20 terms.

"As I reflect on my career, I am filled with gratitude. I am grateful for the support of my constituents, who have entrusted me to represent them and encouraged me to become a leader on national and international issues. I am grateful for my supporters and allies, who have worked side-by-side with me to fight for issues we care about: health, environmental protection, women's and gay rights, and strengthening the ties between the United States and our most important ally, the State of Israel," Waxman said.

"I first ran for office because I believe government can be a force for good in people's lives. I have held this view throughout my career in Congress. And I will leave the House of Representatives with my conviction intact. I have learned that progress is not always easy. It can take years of dedication and struggle. But it's worth fighting for.

"The reason for my decision is simple. After 40 years in Congress, it's time for someone else to have the chance to make his or her mark, ideally someone who is young enough to make the long-term commitment that's required for real legislative success," Waxman continued. "I still feel youthful and energetic, but I recognize if I want to experience a life outside of Congress, I need to start soon. Public office is not the only way to serve, and I want to explore other avenues while I still can."

His retirement leaves questions about who will take over as ranking member of the Energy and Commerce Committee, among the most powerful panels in Congress with jurisdiction over everything from the environment, to food safety to healthcare policy.

Next in line is Rep. Frank Pallone (D-N.J.), who now heads the committee's Health subpanel. Pallone is a tireless policy wonk, never without a bundle of paperwork under his arm. But he's also an ambitious politician, who just staged an unsuccessful run for the Senate seat vacated by the late Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) — a race won by former Newark Mayor Cory Booker.

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